

MUNNERN

By Georgia Wood Pangborn

ILLUSTRATION BY FLORENCE E. STORER



HER name had been given her with distinctness and precision, on a wild midnight when there was sharp trouble in his mouth. Nothing to worry about. Teeth have to come, you know. Any parent, however weakling, can summon sufficient philosophy to bear *that* for them. Only—they do stay awake so, and make everybody else do it with them. She was sleeping, but lightly, while somebody else “had him,” and the summons, stern yet appealing, rung through the house for the first time.

“*Munnern!*”

And she had answered to her name thus coined out of his need like a hound whistled to heel.

Ancient history now! Words had followed thick and fast, tripping each other

up into strange, elfin tangles; big ones and little ones, some clear as diamonds, some with blurred rainbow edges—a wild, hurrying multitude. But “Munnern” stayed. That was her fault. She had clung to it foolishly, making no effort to transmute it into the correct “mother.” Munnern she was still, and likely to remain even when the little voice that had named her should be heavy and deep with an amazing vocabulary.

Heavy and deep—*that* voice! A man’s even step upon the floor instead of that light, clattering hurry, with the danger of a bump as its goal! Can the unborn summers hold such miracles as *that*? A man! Yet exactly this thing does happen to little boys—theoretically. She knew the scientific fact—like interstellar distances, or the age of mountains, not as a thing the mind could really grasp.

She also calmly knew that a little boy so perfect would be a big man so perfect. His questions proved that. Only an extraordinary brain could contrive them.

"Who took care of the first baby?" he inquires one day, solicitously, and she, truthful soul, strives to answer in terms of protoplasm and the pithecanthropus, to his apparent satisfaction. But when she has labored to make him understand what the stars are, and how not even the biggest and wisest man in all the world can aspire to reach them, the calculating, thoughtful eye which he turns heavenward, and the critical solemnity with which he considers that his world is a round thing with nothing to support it any more than one of his soap-bubbles—she feels oddly self-reproachful, as though she ought to have been more careful in the choice of his environment. Unsupported worlds! One should have managed better than that.

Such a *very* little boy! Perhaps—not quite—just a shade—other children in contrast had such a—coarse look. Can it be that they are stronger? If he is to be big in body as well as in brain, maybe . . . some difference in diet; some slight thing may be needed. But there is no hurry; no hurry at all. We will give him an extra nip of cold water in his bath, add a half-ounce to his portion of beef juice, get him a little sleeping-suit so that he can sleep in outdoor winter air: a number of things can be done before we bother one of those specialists, who would only laugh at us for the worrying parents that we are. The boy is all right. Sound as a dollar. He is only of finer clay than other children. . . .

"Small herbs have grace, great weeds do grow apace."

That is all. Still, it would do no harm to take him in some pleasant day. Except that he hasn't been vaccinated yet, and these public conveyances—

The effect of even slight worry upon the mind is strange. One day he had been singularly naughty. "Where is my little boy?" she had besought of him, with tears. And on the night that followed this naughty day there came a dream of which she had nearly died before she could wake. She reached his crib with

stumbling haste. His face was serene in the night light. Was the perfect cheek too red? The hand—was it too hot and dry? He opened his eyes. They were calm; the fearful presence of that dream had not touched *him*.

"I want to come into the big bed," he commanded. She took him thankfully, though it was a practice to be sternly discouraged—and he slept at once, his short arm across her throat protectingly. But her own eyes did not close until morning. Such dreams should not be allowed! What are the good angels about to let them get by?

And in the morning—you would not have said that he was ill in the morning. Nor in the afternoon. He was not naughty like yesterday, but clinging and quiet, and wanting to be kissed a good deal. Perhaps he has taken cold. The lips are hot and he is not hungry. The family doctor is reassuring. But somehow his remedies do not reach the trouble, and if a little boy cannot eat . . .

And now the lights burn all night, night after night—how many? Why, a lifetime, isn't it? Now and then she sleeps heavily, for a few minutes, throwing herself limply across the foot of the bed—he has the big bed for himself now—to be roused by a fretful little voice—"I want to sit in your lap," or "Read!"—and Mr. Jeremy Fisher is read for the hundredth time, and the Tailor of Gloucester for the two hundredth.

A cross and weary little voice, yet when it had been crossest, a sudden reaching up of bony arms and a hot kiss.

Then came the night when she knew in her heart that if the boy were ever to be a man he must go—and go quickly—to more skilful hands than her own. The family doctor has already talked with the specialist over the wire; they have conspired, they will have him, and the manner of that wise old warrior, always charged with the kind serenity which is the most wonderful anodyne these country doctors carry in their arsenal—his manner has been so kind and reassuring—so very—that if she had not been a wise Munnern she might have been reassured. But she would have preferred him to be cross.

"Won't it be the same if we have a trained nurse here?" But they say, No,



Drawn by Florence E. Storer.

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—Page 590.

it will not be the same at all. They appear to think the danger lies in herself. He must be completely away from her anxiety. Doctors don't like mothers. They make *that* plain!

The arrangements are made by telephone. "Is there a room at Mrs. —'s sanatorium?" There is one, fortunately, vacant this afternoon. Time-tables, then, and now order the carriage. We have delayed so long; let things be done quickly now!

"Can you have him dressed by ten o'clock?" Yes, she can have him dressed. He objects. Seems to think they are expecting too much of him.

"I don't want to walk."

They explain it as a pleasure-trip. He has so often wanted to ride on the cars; well, he is to do that to-day for the first time. But he shakes his head: "Not to-day."

There is mud on the knees of his leggings. The clean suit taken from the drawer is discovered to be innocent of buttons. Is it the mud, reminiscent of his last out-door romp, that makes her heart beat in that odd thick way?

"The carriage is here——"

At that he rouses. He will assist with the baggage. When one travels one carries things. He is not equal to a suitcase, but he will take her hand-bag, and take it he does, and never lets go during all the long hours of that journey. The hand clasped upon it shows every bone, but never loosens its grasp.

She has been dreading the jostling of the crowds. But there is no jostling, none of the little roughnesses. Even in the dingy waiting-room she notices a difference. Not curiosity or staring, but a deft making way, quick and civil answers when questions are necessary, a stepping back to give precedence. Their little party is an important one. The small pale face wins for them the right of way.

One word of encouragement for him thus far has been "engines." "You are going," they have told him, "upon the truly cars. Perhaps you will see the engineer himself. Maybe the fireman, too. Most certainly the conductor." He seems to think it a pity that such joys cannot be postponed until a day when he can appreciate them better; yet he smiles,

and there is a spark of the old enthusiasm. It is six months since he himself determined to be an engineer some day, yet he has never swerved from that decision. Probably there never was a Christmas more exclusively devoted to engines than the one just past.

For a little while they exchange looks of congratulation over his head. He seems really to like it. At least he makes no complaint. The rumble may send him to sleep—he needs sleep so much!

If only he had not been looking out when they passed another train—the sudden noise and the swiftness.

She feels the leap of his body, but he makes no sound. He only stares rigidly at the new fear. The white smoke flying past, who knows what shapes it takes to a brain already distraught? Imagination sleeps in the small brain of a child like a jinnee in a bottle; a word can loose it, in monstrous shapes of horror or loveliness.

The swift dark interval of a tunnel—white smoke, crashing eclipse, huge smoke—and again darkness; it is primeval chaos and a whirling of angry gods. He calls feebly: "Munnern!" She can barely hear it through the noise. She tries to turn his face to the warm oblivion of her bosom, but his neck is rigid. She bends her ear close to his moving lips.

"I want it to stop," he entreats. "It *mustn't* be dark any more!" A royal command like King Canute's.

Alas, his dear engines! Are they like *this*, then? He has lorded it over them so on his nursery floor! In his scrap-book he has pasted cut-out pictures of engines, with portraits of engineers and firemen and train-despatchers. Perhaps if he could realize the engineer out front—looking out of his cab all the way, keeping everything safe—she reminds him of this.

But no. The world is larger than he thought, engineers and their cars not a thing for very little boys. The unstable world is topsy-turvy, as one would expect of a thing with no solid foundation, and his dear engines have played him false.

The train stops upon a trestle overlooking a hundred or so of the behemoths, snuffling and gliding. Surely it will please him to look down on these. Yet he regards them but wanly. Is it only the day that makes things seem so wrong? He

had tried to make them understand that this was no time to be making a joyous trip to New York. When the cars start again he hides his head against her breast, quivering and silent.

Will the journey never end? She begins to find her own terror now in the driving smoke. It is she now who shrinks at the tunnels, the noise. And there is an odd pain in the pulses? A thrill, like an electric current. . . .

But one's brain is calm and reasonable. No one could say "a hysterical woman." Yet, through and through and through again—the dagger upon her wrists, while time and train rush together with her and the boy.

Flying shapes in the huge smoke—giant threats in the quick darknesses. What are these that look in at her as they speed past the window—women; women with children in their arms, all of them! "We were in a besieged city," they say, "our children starved. . . ."

And another: "We lived until the city was taken—by barbarous men. . . ."

"Our children lie with us in the pit of Cawnpore. . . ."

"You tremble—you! Bearing him to safety and recovery! Once, the mercenaries of Herod came . . . then Rachel wept!"

After these a vast gray legion—a continual mist of pale amorphous faces: "We are those poor whose level is the sea-floor of life. Our children come and go without joy. We are the mothers of the defective—of criminals—whose daughters walk the streets. . . . Oh, fortunate woman! Be ashamed of your fear!"

Yet, so far from being ashamed of the littleness of her cause for sorrow, it is as if her heart opened wide to all these others. They rush in, and there is room for all, but her own is in no wise displaced. It is knit with them into the fabric of the world's sorrow. . . .

And what is this new pain, physical, actual, right under the pressure of his lax body?

A dull ache. Oh, yes, she remembers to have read of it—"My Hunt After the Captain." His son was reported killed. . . . The description is accurate: "Dull ache in that obscurely sensitive region, somewhere below the heart, where the nervous centre called the *semi-lunar ganglion*

lies, unconscious of itself until a great grief or a mastering anxiety reaches it. . . ."

Hunting for a grown-up son through hospitals in war-time: *that* is anxiety, if you like! Merely taking a little boy to a sanatorium—why, that should be nothing at all! Nevertheless, the *semi-lunar ganglion* is not to be comforted. "Mastering anxiety!"

He doesn't mind the ferry so much. The sea-gulls gain a wintry smile. Only he must be assured that there is to be no more of that dreadful quick darkness—no more tunnels. They swear to him by all truth that the boat will not go through any tunnels, and point out the lovely Brodingnagian city, a towering silhouette through a mist of gray and gold.

New York? Very good, if there are to be no more tunnels on the other side. No; no more tunnels; not any at all.

"And when we go home again there mustn't be any—"

"Well—there *is* another way of getting back—"

"And not any autos!" It has just occurred to him that on a day of abounding misfortune an auto may be included. They have been speaking to each other of taxi-cabs, but he understands.

"Not any auto of any kind at all!"

So they apologize to the person in blue and brass. "Isn't there a hansom somewhere? The boy is auto-shy—"

Not even this potentate lifts an eyebrow at the royal commands. It has been so all along, she thinks; a deference, as if some invisible messenger preceded: "Right of way!"

The old hackman hurries them into his ancient mouldy cab. A glance at his face shows that this is something more to him than a fare; that he has known something about children in his day.

Such a broken-down affair! It gives the impression of being tied with strings—suggesting infirmity beyond cure, and a wheel bumps strangely, but at least the boy can see the horse. There is no hated whirl and jump to prove his parents traitors.

An old house—very clean. The women in blue and white look at him with critical interest. Here at last he is no longer royal—no longer the centre of the solar system. He is a "case."

"Doesn't look nearly so bad as little Annie did," one says to another. The word "malnutrition" is mentioned. Ah me! The prayerful pains that have gone to the fashioning of his fare! They look at each other intelligently when she mentions this fact, and smile forbearingly. "Too much pains, perhaps," says the head nurse politely. If they only knew! She tells them how bright he is, how good, and when well—how beautiful. She touches his hair. It is harsh and dry.

"You don't mind if we cut it, do you? He'll be so much more comfortable."

Has he been uncomfortable with it, then? She had not thought; it was so pretty. But it is no longer pretty; even she can see that.

"By all means."

"Then," comes haughtily from threatened royalty, "mother must cut it."

He has been told that he is to stay there until he is well, yet he has not quite understood. He looks about the room with suspicion, at the women in blue and white, at the high, white beds, and delivers his ultimatum: "I will not go to bed in this house!"

It is not a challenge, but a statement of fact.

"When are we going home?"

"When you are well, my darling."

"I am well now. I will not undress. I will go home to-night."

Not an appeal. It is quite settled: "To-night!"

But before the debate can proceed far—the doctor. And a wild storm with the stethoscope as its centre. . . . Poor King Canute! The stethoscope retires at last, victorious.

"Well, mother"—that is the doctor's way with the fluttered multitude that crowd his path—a world of understanding he puts into the word—"we can make this boy well. But"—there is something threatening in his kindness, something military—"you must let us *have* him, you know."

"Have him?" What does the man mean? That is what she has brought him in for; that they may "have him," for a few days. Then she will take him back. She will learn how to do things for him, get new ideas about his diet. Then she will take him home. Something of this idea she gives to the physician. She is to

stay at a near-by hotel and spend most of her time with him.

The physician and nurse exchange glances of sympathy—for each other. They have been through all that so many times. It will take a great deal of explaining. They will talk it over with her to-morrow, they say. She is content.

"It is nothing that can't be put right. We will make him strong and well. . . ." The word "malnutrition" is mentioned again, this time with a note of final authority. And he is gone, curt and kind—to other mothers, no doubt. . . .

And now—oh, oh, little King Canute! The tide boils up at the foot of his throne. She must leave him. . . . No use to explain to him. A kiss and a hug—he is too weak to fully express his mind. . . .

She hurries. She hears him cry—but she is a fine, brave woman—no nerves—none at all. She goes—to the hotel.

"You get a good night's rest," they have been telling her. "What you need is sleep."

It is a pleasant room. She sits alone and stares at a simpering Gainsborough. On the other wall minces "The Dancing Lesson." Really, as she reviews the past week she is proud of herself. She must be a remarkably strong woman to bear so much and not be ill. Tired, of course; very tired. . . . How he did cry! . . . She will eat a good dinner. Surely. Yet—the tray seems singularly uninviting. . . . The ganglion is still busy. . . . "Stupid, unreasoning brain, common to man and beast, which aches in the supreme moments of life, as when the dam loses her young ones or the wild horse is lassoed. . . ."

A good night's sleep. She wakes every hour to give him medicine, see how he is. . . . a good night's rest! At two o'clock she reads advertisements of little boys' suits in the last evening's paper. This will be a good opportunity for shopping. . . . At last the windows are gray.

She eyes the telephone. One must let the nurses eat their breakfasts, no doubt—and then: "How is he?"

"Coming on very nicely indeed. But I should *not* advise your seeing him this morning. Not for the best results."

What are they concealing? Not see him this morning?

She must be ingratiating, must cajole, must flatter. One does not become haughty toward the holders of hostages. Her voice is silk and honey as she expresses her confidence in the woman at the other end of the wire. She ends with: "But of course you won't object to my peeping at him through the crack in the door?"

A sound like a suppressed exclamation, then quick and firm refusal.

"No. It has been tried in other cases, and is not a success. No. I don't allow peeping through cracks."

Oh, of course! Munnern understands. There are foolish, hysterical women with whom it would never do. They would see him and forget their promise, and rush in upon him with wild kisses.

She carefully explains to the gray-eyed woman at the other end of the wire how different she is from those other mothers, upon whom the gray-eyed one's opinion has been based. She assures her that she would leave the crack as she found it and depart. Strange! The woman cannot see that difference between her and other women. Any superiority of strength of mind has passed quite unnoticed.

Very well; there is still the doctor. *He* must have observed it. Was she not steady yesterday? Did she whimper? Did she tell them about how the *semi-lunar ganglion* was behaving? Or the pain in her wrists?

It is rather early, perhaps, to talk to so busy a doctor as this one. She feels a pang of sympathy as she calls him from his breakfast. But it is an important matter. What is a hungry doctor and his coffee compared to a mother who is being kept from her boy by a gray-eyed woman in blue and white?

Still—he needn't have been—no—not savage, but—

"It would be most undesirable for you to see him if we are to get the best results." ("Best results," again.)

"But—"

"If I can't have him absolutely, I don't care to handle the case."

"How long, then?"

"Two months, at the very least."

Two months! Two years—two centuries! She had never dreamed of its being over a week. She hastens to explain how very much better she can do for

him at home. She lays bare her own wisdom, comparing herself favorably with trained nurses. The wire tingles with impatient contempt.

"When you brought him in you were under the impression that he was moribund. Why do you object now to two months' recovery?"

She had been under the impression that he was—why, no—not *that*. One does not use such words even in one's own consciousness. She had been frightened—but she had not admitted the shade of her fear. The physician, piercing her reserve, had read the thought and named it as he would make any other diagnosis.

"There's not the slightest cause for worry," snaps the wire. "Good-by."

She turns away with an odd smile. She does not resent his brusqueness. It comes to her that she would be sorry if he found it necessary to speak gently. Think! It may be that the next mother he speaks to—though he soften his voice never so, may drop at his feet like a stone. It is for the sake of those other mothers to whom he must be gentle, that he cuts short the needless inquiries of people who are really very fortunate—like herself. Think what he sees in the hospitals and be ashamed of your importunities! She thinks of his temper with a happy smile, and treats herself to a better breakfast than she has had for many days. . . .

"You may see him to-morrow for fifteen minutes," thus the gray-eyed woman over the wire. "After that, not for two weeks."

She is humbled now. She has been made to understand. They have tamed her. She is submissive. See how Puss follows you with her great yellow eyes when you bear away one of her kittens! She makes no objection. It is the law of the giants—and she trusts them (with reservations). At least she knows her powerlessness. She purrs, and fawns, and submits.

To-morrow, then—for fifteen minutes. That is very kind.

"When you brought him in you thought —"

She uses the physician's dread phrase to whip herself into acquiescence.

He was sitting up in bed with his treasures about him, at work upon a new book

of engines, coloring them with his colored pencils. He did not smile as she entered. If she hadn't known his ways she would have thought him indifferent to her. But she knew. It was his mask of reserve. His shingled hair gave him an oddly mature look, for it had been done by skilful masculine hands, not nibbled by a Munnern's scissors. That and his thinness had added years to his small face, and something else—was it the writing of sorrow and pain? So little! Had it been a man's-size trouble—her desertion of him, and the physical wretchedness?

She felt again the insecurity of the environment to which she had brought him, Unsupported worlds . . . parents who are toppled over at a breath, who possess no weapon at all against dreadful things happening to little boys . . . mothers whose best efforts only plunge them into a dreadful thing called malnutrition?

He regarded her intently for a moment, then set her a task coloring one of his engines. She might put on the red, he said. A mark of favor, red being a pleasant color to apply.

They worked in silence, he directing with his finger. His head rested against her. Evidently he was wonderfully improved. Yet he was scheduled to be in bed for two weeks yet! If he had been at home, she acknowledged with humility, she would have known no better than to let him up. To what unsteady hands had this imperial vase been intrusted for nearly four years! Shall she ever dare to receive him back again? Let him stay with these people who know. Oh, let him stay! She has done so ill by him!

The engine was colored. The fifteen minutes were up. Not again for two weeks. She kissed the short hair and rose. He looked at her wildly—oh—the terrible under lip! It is trembling—it comes out!

"If you cry they won't let me come so

often," she whispers. The intelligence of a conspirator flashes into his eyes, but—can he? He understands, but has he power to control himself?

The tiny face trembles like a reflection in troubled water. Slowly—like the closing of a man's fist, it strengthens, stiffens. Very pale, he turns to the nurse, and shows her how to go on with the coloring. She may use the green, he says, in a steady voice. He does not look again at Munnern.

No hysterical farewells, woman! You commanded the man, now he commands you.

She went out with backward looks, but he did not glance toward her. He was too busy. Yet when she was outside the door there came a steady silver note: "Good-by!" Not even a tremor? Yes—but so veiled that only she could have detected it.

She stood in the hall a moment and strangely exulted. She understood at last how it was that little boys grew up into men. She had an instant's vague vision of a being tall and splendid, deep-voiced (a singing voice, too), deep-chested, wise, good, strong above all other men—such a creature as perhaps never lived except in the imagination of young girls and mothers.

Down the narrow dark stairs the vision went with her. She leaned upon its arm, tired, old, and very happy: "This is my son!"

Two months! That will be the end of April. There will be the first blush of young green in the grass, crocuses, a softness in the air, red maple flowers on the branch across his window, bluebirds, meadow-larks, little chickens to watch. He will even be able to make mud pies. It will be the allegorical return of spring. A rush of almost unbearable joy and eager life!

He will come back with the spring. . . .

